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Panama's Strongman Tries to Ride Out the Storm

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PANAMA, June 21 — Despite charges of criminal activity and opposition calls for his resignation, Panama's army commander appears to be fighting with considerable determination to remain as the country's pre-eminent leader.

The pro-Government press and senior Government officials have denounced critics of the army commander, Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega, as traitors. Trade union officials have come forward to swear unswerving loyalty to the general, who says he is the victim of a campaign to destabilize the country.

The appeal to nationalist sentiment appears to be having the desired effect. When the Christian Democratic and Authentic Panamanian parties, two opposition groups, held a street rally last week, fewer than 400 people showed up.

"People are unsatisfied with the present state of things, but they don't want anybody coming in here telling them what to do," a Panamanian political leader who is critical of General Noriega said, referring to an impression here that there is pressure from the United States for changes in Panama.

An Unbroken Grip on Power

Several foreign diplomats and Panamanian politicians said they foresee a troubled period in which the military will attempt to hold on to as much power as it can. Most experts on the situation think the army wants to take control of the Panama Canal in the year 2000, as called for in the treaty with the United States, to guarantee its dominant role as well as its income.

Some political leaders speak of the possibility of a barracks coup against General Noriega. Others predict that fellow officers will ask him to gracefully ease from power in the next year. But few seem willing to bet that the general, who is the real holder of power in Panama, will fall soon.

"I have been watching Noriega for many years and I have never seen anybody get the better of him," said one foreign official who knows Panama intimately. He added that as the former head of army intelligence, General Noriega rules through a sophisticated network of informers and carefully selected supporters in key posts.

The New York Times has reported charges from several American officials that General Noriega has been involved in drug smuggling and money laundering, and that he has been spying on behalf of Cuba. They have also accused him of involvement in the death of an opposition leader who was found beheaded, as well as stealing the last presidential election with the help of a paramilitary hit squad.

A C.I.A. Role Described

General Noriega has denied the charges, but the accusations have set off a political furor in Panama and led to speculation that the Reagan Administration is trying to oust the Panamanian general. Highly reliable Panamanian sources with close ties to the army say General Noriega has done several unsavory favors for the Central Intelligence Agency and feels he is now being stabbed in the back.

Two Panamanians with close Government contacts said General Noriega consulted closely with American officials in selecting the last President, Nicolás Ardito Barletta. Mr. Barletta was then installed by a fraudulent vote count that the United States Embassy was aware of but did not protest, the two Panamanians said.

"Sadly, the Americans had no interest in avoiding the fraud," said Mario Julio Galindo, a leading opposition lawyer.

American officials have confirmed that they knew of the fraudulent vote, but felt they had to work with Mr. Barletta. They became angry, however, when General Noriega dismissed Mr. Barletta last September to thwart an investigation of army involvement in the beheading of an opposition leader.

Army Entrenched in Government

Even if General Noriega should step down or be deposed, virtually no political commentator or diplomat here seems to believe the army can be persuaded to give up its institutional domination of the Government in the near future. Even opposition leaders talk of convincing the army to reform itself, rather than demanding that it completely give up power.

"What we seek is a break within the military structure that will permit a political opening," said Ricardo Arias Calderón, leader of the opposition Christian Democratic Party.

General Noriega's apparent determination to remain in power may be aided by Panamanians' disposition to compromise. Opposition leaders say they

do not want Panama to suffer the political turmoil that has swept much of Central America.

The army, known as the Panama Defense Force, seized power in 1968 and has imposed or deposed the last five presidents. Although it appears to have engaged in a wide range of misdeeds, the army does not seem to rule particularly harshly by Central American standards.

'It Really Is Like the Mafia'

Well-informed Panamanian sources who have worked with the army say it skims funds, takes kickbacks, engages in smuggling and has a political structure resembling a racketeering network in which loyal henchmen share in the spoils.

The army-created Democratic Revolutionary Party controls the National Assembly. Army appointees or paid followers run the pro-Government press and main radio stations. The state is the largest employer, allowing the army to run a vast patronage system and dominate the Government bureaucracy, according to foreign and Panamanian political analysts.

"It really is like the Mafia," said one foreign diplomat who knows the country well. "It's very corrupt but if you play along you probably won't get hurt."

In comparison, the opposition political parties appear poorly organized and their goals unclear. Their leaders concede that they have been unable to maintain broad popular support to confront the army, even though it appears the opposition won the last election in all but the official count and even though it has mounted impressive mass demonstrations in the past.

An Aging Opposition Leader

The most charismatic opposition figure is Arnulfo Arias, head of the Authentic Panamanian Party and the candidate from whom the election is said to have been stolen. But he's 85 years old and there is no one of equal drawing power to replace him. His party appears to be based on little more than his charismatic appeal and most analysts think it will collapse when Mr. Arias dies.

Without him, the opposition will be forced to rely on the Christian Democrats. It is well organized but so far appears to lack the broad base of support or the charismatic leader capable of forging a force for change.

The opposition's problems could be compounded if the army allows the governing Democratic Revolutionary Party, now headed by President Eric Arturo Delvalle, to become more independent and seek authentic political leaders for the next presidential election scheduled in 1989.

There is pressure within the governing party to seek a more independent stance from the army, according to one of its leading members. That arrangement might suit the military because it would retain a dominant voice in the country's affairs but be insulated from the public criticism it is now suffering.